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John Hamling, 74, Vinton, Iowa
Pat Hamling, 74, Vinton, Iowa
Karen Keninger
Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School, Vinton, Iowa
May 16, 2011

Karen Keninger: All right. My name is Karen Keninger and I'm with the Oral History Project with the Iowa Department for the Blind. I'm interviewing, today, Pat and John Hamling.

They are Vinton residents. Pat, if you could tell me, and John; if you would each tell me whether or not you agree to have this conversation recorded.

Pat Hamling: Yes, I do.

Keninger: John?

John Hamling: There's my answer. (Laughter)

P. Hamling: Gee.

Keninger: John says he agrees as well, okay. Pat, tell me a little bit about yourself; start with where you were born, where you live, what...A little bit about your background.

P. Hamling: Okay. I was born in La Porte, rural La Porte City, and now live in Vinton. I am married and have four children, and ten grandchildren, and one great-grandchild.

Keninger: All right. How long have you been blind?

P. Hamling: I have been visually impaired all my life. I have been totally blind since I was 50.

Keninger: All right. Where did you go to school?

P. Hamling: I went two years in Gilbertville, and then I came down to the Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School.

Keninger: Okay. So, you were in about second grade when you came down here?

P. Hamling: Third grade.

Keninger: Third grade, okay. And then you went for the rest of your schooling at the braille school?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: Tell me a little bit about that experience.

P. Hamling: Well, it was a wonderful experience. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I was with people of my own kind. I got a good education. I was in a lot of social activities and extra activities. I just, really, was very pleased with my education. I had a wonderful time; made a lot of wonderful friends.

Keninger: What kind of extra activities did you participate in?

P. Hamling: Oh, I was a cheerleader, I was in the band, and I was in the chorus. That's all I can think of, at this time.

Keninger: That would have kept you pretty busy, don't you think?

P. Hamling: Yeah. (Laughter)

Keninger: Did you get to travel with the wrestling team or the track team?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: Where did you go?

P. Hamling: Oh, we went to Minnesota and then rural, I mean, here in Iowa.

Keninger: Was there a track team then?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: So, you traveled with them as well?

P. Hamling: Well yes, I was in girl's track.

Keninger: Oh, you were a track…you ran track?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: Oh okay. Did you do any other sports? Did they have a swim team or anything like that then?

P. Hamling: No. I swam, but we did not have a swim team; a girl's swim team, anyway.

Keninger: I gather, I assume, that you met John at school?

P. Hamling: I did.

Keninger: When did you guys get married?

P. Hamling: In 1962. We will be married 49 ears.

Keninger: Well congratulations. You're 50th is coming up.

P. Hamling: Thank you. (Laughter)

Keninger: That's awesome! Have you lived all your married life here in Vinton?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: Tell me a little bit about the community in Vinton.

P. Hamling: Oh, I like the community. It's small enough that you can get around any place you want to go. It's friendly; people are very friendly and very helpful and kind.

Keninger: Are there a number of blind people who live here in Vinton?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: How many would you say?

P. Hamling: Oh I don't know, twenty, maybe.

Keninger: Do you think of it as sort of a community within a community, or just part of the greater community? Do you socialize a lot with the blind people that are here in Vinton or are just friends with everybody?

P. Hamling: Well, we communicate with the visually impaired and we are also with the normal people; normal sighted people.

Keninger: I am interested in asking you a lot of questions about raising kids as a visually impaired person. Are you up for that?

P. Hamling: Uh-huh.

Keninger: I know that you…tell me about your children.

P. Hamling: Well, our oldest one, Mark, is an Engineer at Ideal Industries here in Vinton. Brian is a, he just is a businessman. He has apartments, and he owns the Laundromat and the video store, so he keeps my husband busy. Anyway, Carol is a homemaker; she has five children. And Kevin is a graduate of college, and he does local work.

Keninger: Where does Carol live? Does she live here in town?

P. Hamling: She lives right at the edge of Vinton, here. Right out at the edge of town.

Keninger: So, your grandkids are close by. Your kids are all doing well running successful businesses, and everyone is doing well?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: That's wonderful. It's got a lot to do with raising them. Having kids of my own, people are always interested in a lot of just the details of raising kids when you are visually impaired. Can you talk about some of that in terms

of when they were little, for example? And people like to know, how did you keep track of them?

P. Hamling: Well, one thing I remember is I used to put bright colored shirts on them so I could find them; because I could see some then. That helped me keep track of them. And, of course, I had a good hollering voice. (Laughter)

Keninger: Yeah. (Laughter) So, did you keep them fenced in, in the yard or anything like that?

P. Hamling: We do have a fenced in back yard and that was wonderful.

J. Hamling: Shoes…Bells on their shoes.

Keninger: Some people put bells on their shoes?

P. Hamling: Oh, bells. Oh yeah, yes; bells on the shoes. I did that.

Keninger: So, you could hear them when they were walking around?

P. Hamling: Um-hum. That was wonderful and I also had a, one of those straps that you strap your child's arm to your arm. That way you keep track of them.

Keninger: Well, like when you're taking them downtown.

P. Hamling: Yeah right, walking to keep track of them.

Keninger: Did they fight that or was that pretty normal for them to do?

P. Hamling: Well, after they once knew that was the way it was, they didn't fight me. (Laughter)

Keninger: Mom…(Laughter)

P. Hamling: Now, their dad may get by with anything.

Keninger: Did they ever hide from you?

P. Hamling: Oh yes.

Keninger: Tell me about that.

P. Hamling: Well, like for example, one day I was vacuuming and our oldest son and his buddy were there. And anyway, my vacuum would stop and so I'd check everything; check the bag and everything and then I'd turn it on and it'd start again. So, I would vacuum some more and then it would stop again. I did the same thing. Well, here they are in the other room unplugging my vacuum and I didn't know it.

Keninger: Oh those little stinkers! (Laughter)

P. Hamling: They just loved to pull tricks on me, and they did plenty of that.

Keninger: Do you think it was because you were visually impaired or just because they were kids?

P. Hamling: I think just because they were kids; probably a combination of both.

Keninger: So, what did you do when you found them doing stuff like that?

P. Hamling: Well, what can you do? I thought it was kind of cute. It disgusted me for a little bit. (Laughter)

Keninger: How old were they when they were pulling that one?

P. Hamling: Oh I don't know, probably twelve, ten…twelve.

Keninger: Oh, a little bit older; old enough to know better.

P. Hamling: Oh yeah. (Laughter)

Keninger: (Laughter) So, when you took them downtown, for example, you would hang on…When they were little, you had the strap to keep track of them. Did you…You had four of them. Did you expect the older kids to look after the younger kids pretty much?

P. Hamling: Yeah, pretty much. You know what? They were pretty good at that. And when I went to the grocery store, I always made the little ones stay in the basket because that just worked better to know where they were. I tried not to take them all at once.

Keninger: So, when you went to the grocery store, did you need somebody to help you find stuff, or did the kids help you find stuff, or?

P. Hamling: The kids helped me. Gradually, as I was losing my sight then I needed more help, and they helped me. The clerks helped me, but mostly the kids helped me. As they got older, they were better at helping.

Keninger: Did you always go even when they were older, or did you just send them.

P. Hamling: Mostly I sent them. But we had a local grocery store close by, and that was nice 'cause they could run over there for me.

Keninger: Which is a normal thing for anybody's kids to do when they're old enough to do it?

P. Hamling: Right, right. And they loved it.

Keninger: When did your kids figure out that you couldn't see well? Do you have a memory of that?

P. Hamling: Oh, I don't know. No, I really don't; probably when they were four or five around there. I remember when we'd go for, I'd go with them to a music program or anything; they'd never want me to walk with them. They'd make me walk ahead or behind. They were embarrassed, as they got older. (Laughter)

Keninger: Is that like junior high, high school?

P. Hamling: Yes, yes.

Keninger: Yeah, that's pretty typical don't you think?

P. Hamling: I think so.

Keninger: And, no matter who their mother is.

P. Hamling: Right, right.

Keninger: How could you tell what they were doing when they were little, or not so little?

P. Hamling: Oh, you could hear 'em. And the other kids were tattle-tales.

Keninger: You shopped for their clothes, and did the kinds of things any mother would do. Talk about shopping for the kids.

P. Hamling: You know, we were very fortunate. We went to Armstrong's and there was a man up there that helped me a lot. He just always helped me with finding the right clothes for the kids; and the clothes that were most reasonable and everything. He was really good for us.

Keninger: Yeah. Then how would you check if they fit?

P. Hamling: Oh, I'd feel.

Keninger: Okay cool. These are a lot of questions people ask me, which is why I am asking you. (Laughter)

P. Hamling: (Laughter) Except one time; I was very embarrassed and I went to, I thought it was my son, and I went to feel if his shirt fit and it was a woman. (Laughter) That was quite embarrassing.

Keninger: (Laughter) Oh goodness. Oh dear. Talk about when they got sick; which, of course, all kids do. But talk about what you used, ways you knew, took their temperature, or figured out if they had a fever?

P. Hamling: Oh, I went by feel for fever, and, you know, they're not themselves when they're sick. So, you pretty much know when they're sick. So, it was really no different.

Keninger: A sighted person would say, "Oh I look at their eyes."

P. Hamling: Oh, you don't have to look at their eyes.

Keninger: You can tell can't you?

P. Hamling: Yeah, yeah.

Keninger: So, what about medicine?

P. Hamling: Oh that; they have those medicine spoons, you know, that have marks on them. So, they're not so hard to deal with.

Keninger: Did you ever have a serious accident where you had to take a kid to get stitches or to the emergency room?

P. Hamling: Oh yeah.

Keninger: How did you handle that?

P. Hamling: Oh I'd call somebody and, 'cause John worked, you know, nights. Usually, when there was an accident he wasn't home, so I had to find another way to get our kid out to the doctor. I'd just call somebody.

Keninger: Un-hum. Sometimes people, blind people, take different approaches to what they have their kids do for them because they are blind or visually impaired. Were there any things that you had your kids specifically do for you that you wouldn't have had them do if you could see?

P. Hamling: Read things. I had the kids read recipes a lot. I don't know, other than reading signs and different things. That was a big help. Really, I can't think of anything else.

Keninger: The relationship that you maintain with your kids, as I recall, pretty very clearly "I'm the mom, you're the kid. Don't you forget it!" (Laughter)

P. Hamling: Yeah. (Laughter)

Keninger: And don't you forget it! Were the kids involved in sports?

P. Hamling: Not so much sports. They were some. They were in track and some things. They weren't out for football or any of those sports.

Keninger: So, when they were, when they had track events and stuff, did you go?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: How was that for you? Could you see what they were doing?

P. Hamling: No, but you just are there.

Keninger: And, that matters to them?

P. Hamling: And, that matters to them.

Keninger: And, did you hang out with the other mothers who were doing the same thing you were pretty much?

P. Hamling: Oh, probably not; probably more isolated. I was probably with the little ones, you know, that weren't involved.

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Keninger: Looking after them while you were waiting for the big kids to get done with their events?

P. Hamling: Um-hum, right.

Keninger: How far apart are your kids spread out?

P. Hamling: Let's see, from the first, the first two are three years apart; the second two are two years apart; the third two are 15 months apart.

Keninger: So, they're pretty packed together.

P. Hamling: Yeah, they were.

Keninger: Were there things that you wished that you could do with or for your kids that you didn't feel like you could, because you were visually impaired? Or did you find ways to do the stuff you wanted to do?

P. Hamling: Pretty much, I found ways to do things I wanted to. There are things I wish I had done differently.

Keninger: As any mother would. Can you think of anything, any challenges that you figured out how to manage, with regard to the kids that kind of stumped you at first?

P. Hamling: Not really.

Keninger: Ordinary day-in and day-out child rearing?

P. Hamling: Yeah, right.

Keninger: Did you help your kids with their homework?

P. Hamling: Yep. Yes, I did.

Keninger: How could you do that when you couldn't read a book?

P. Hamling: Well, I used to sit over by a bright light and give them their spelling words; and doing their math problems at the same time they did them and to see if they got the right answer.

Keninger: You could see well enough at that time to read the book, if you had a good enough light?

P. Hamling: Right.

Keninger: As your vision…Your vision was good enough throughout the time that they were growing to be able to do that?

P. Hamling: It was as I got older that it went.

Keninger: What's the cause of your blindness?

P. Hamling: Retinitis Pigmentosa.

Keninger: So, it took a pretty predictable path.

P. Hamling: Right.

Keninger: Tell me about your grandkids.

P. Hamling: Oh, we've got a bunch of good grandkids. Who doesn't, huh?

Keninger: Well, of course.

P. Hamling: Oh, they're very helpful. I have two granddaughters, of Carol's, and they come in and help me. Like, Saturday we made pies. They rolled out the piecrust for me. We just work together. It's fun.

Keninger: How old do you think your grandkids were when they came to understand that you couldn't see?

P. Hamling: Oh, I don't know. I remember when Callie was two; I used to tell her my cane helped me see. So one day she was there and we were on the floor and she wanted me to read a book. I said, "Grandma can't." I said, "I can't see." And she said, "Just a minute grandma." And she ran and got my cane; then she brought it to me and said, "Now you can see grandma, read the book." (Laughter)

Keninger: (Laughter) Anything else about the kids that you can think of that would be of interest? You've had people asking you these questions probably all your life.

P. Hamling. Yeah. Other than when I'd bake cookies or muffins, I'd always miss one on the cookie sheet and it'd go in the dishwater. They use to get the biggest bang out of that when I'd wash a cookie or a muffin.

Keninger: They probably wish you hadn't done that.

P. Hamling: Yeah, right. (Laughter)

Keninger: (Laughter) "Mom!" So, do you spend much time with your grandkids these days?

P. Hamling: Oh yeah, especially the ones who live right around here. We take care of them. Usually, we have one or two of them when they go away so they don't fight at home.

Keninger: Oh.

P. Hamling: If there's not so many in the mix, it goes better.

Keninger: Sure, sure. They probably really enjoy their time they get to spend with you, too.

P. Hamling: Yes. We play cards, and play games and things.

Keninger: Have you seen a lot of changes in what you would think of as what blind people do, or opportunities for blind people or ways of approaching things since you…over your lifetime?

P. Hamling: Oh, I don't know. Not really.

Keninger: Things seem pretty much the same? People doing what they do?

P. Hamling: Right.

Keninger: You've seen a lot of changes in the school, obviously, over the years.

P. Hamling: Yeah. Our grandchildren are home schooled, so that's different.

Keninger: Do you participate in any of that?

P. Hamling: Oh, I help out. I always tell them I do the Home Ec.

Keninger: Okay, that's important. I remember that you are one very fine cook. Well, is there anything else that you can think of that would be particularly interesting to somebody who didn't know about how blind people live? People make a lot of assumptions about what we do and what we don't do.

P. Hamling: Yeah. Well, one thing; I'm marking my cans of vegetables and fruits. I write it on the Dymo Tape and John gets the magnetic tape and then he glues that on there; puts it on there and then I have these and I put them on the cans and rubber band them together for two or three that are the same, you know. Then when I use that last can, I put it on the refrigerator. It's a magnet, so it sticks right to the refrigerator so I can reuse them.

Keninger: Then you have your grocery list right there on the refrigerator. That's brilliant!

P. Hamling: It really works. That was John's idea. That was pretty good.

Keninger: Do you have to mark any other kinds of things besides this stuff?

P. Hamling: Oh I do. Well, I used to think that I would remember, but I don't. So, I do mark pretty much everything.

Keninger: In the kitchen; spices and that kind of stuff?

P. Hamling: Yeah.

Keninger: Do you mark your clothes in any particular way?

P. Hamling: No, I just try to keep them on hangers. I try to go by feel. Yeah, I wished I had a way to mark my clothes. I have a friend that has a color thing; she holds it up to a garment and it tells her what color it is. But they're $800.00, so I don't have one.

Keninger: I think I bought one for about $200.

P. Hamling: Oh yeah. That would be better.

Keninger: Actually, we have some for about $100.

P. Hamling: They do?

Keninger: In our Aids and Devices, yeah.

P. Hamling: Really? I should check into that 'cause $800 was kind of steep for me.

Keninger: It was too steep for me, too.

P. Hamling: No, but that would be nice to have something to tell you what color things are because I have to go ask John, and, you know.

Keninger: So, when the kids were little you kept track of their clothes doing their laundry and keeping…making sure they were wearing things that matched.

P. Hamling: Yeah.

Keninger: How did you do that?

P. Hamling: That went good. I had four dishpans and I put their clothes each in a dishpan. And I tried to keep their outfits together, too.

Keninger: Socks; what did you do about socks?

P. Hamling: I put socks…I pinned them together.

Keninger: Okay. So they would always have two socks?

P. Hamling: Right.

Keninger: Marking things is certainly an interesting thing I think for people. That's another question, "How do you tell your shoes apart?"

P. Hamling: That's kind of bad. A couple of weeks ago I went with one white shoe and one brown shoe someplace. That's embarrassing. It was hurried. I was in a hurry and it was just carelessness on my part.

Keninger: I did that once. I went to a wedding that way. (Laughter)

P. Hamling: Oh no! (Laughter) I went to a doctor one time that way, and they had me go in this dressing room. They said, "Take everything off but your shoes." I had one white shoe and one brown shoe. I bet that doctor thought, "Oh, that poor blind lady."

Keninger: Don't you just laugh about those things?

P. Hamling: Yeah, you do and just forget it.

Keninger: It's just life.

P. Hamling: It makes a good story.

Keninger: Well, I wonder if you use any of the new technologies that are out there; the computers, the note takers, talking thermometers and all that kind of stuff?

P. Hamling: No…I have a talking thermometer.

Keninger: To use in the kitchen, or is it medical?

P. Hamling: No, medical. Oh, the talking timers. I love them; there're wonderful. Then I have talking clocks. I have a talking thermometer. I have a talking calculator. I have all those.

Keninger: Do you use Braille for grocery lists and notes and phone numbers?

P. Hamling: Yes, yes. I have a file that I keep all my phone numbers and addresses.

Keninger: You've been a Braille reader since you were young?

P. Hamling. No, I didn't learn Braille until I was in my 40s. When I was up at the school, they did not know that my condition was total blindness, and so I did not have Braille. Oh, how I wished I had. So, I'm not a good Braille person. I know Braille well enough to use what I, you know, for it to be help to me. I read all my books on tape.

Keninger: The new digital talking books; are you using those?

P. Hamling: Yes, I have that, too, and I read on that if a book comes in that.

Keninger: You're still using cassettes then?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: Okay. In Iowa, over the years, there has been a lot of politicking; a lot of stuff going on in the blind community about who's right, and who's doing what the way they should. Have you been involved in any of that with the organizations, or in any other way?

P. Hamling: I have not.

Keninger: Have you chosen to just stay back out of that?

P. Hamling: I have.

Keninger: Okay, any particular reason?

P. Hamling: No, just that I…It just gets too much.

Keninger: Okay, that's fair.

P. Hamling: Too involved.

Keninger: I don't have any other specific questions. Do you have any stories you want to share; things that you've done that were fun or interesting?

P. Hamling: Oh, I do a lot of knitting. That's about it. I love to knit. Whenever there's a baby shower, I need a baby gift I knit afghans.

Keninger: Oh yeah. How do you keep the yarn straight?

P. Hamling: I keep it in a bag.

Keninger: How do you know what you're doing with your knitting needles?

P. Hamling: Well, there's Virginia at the library. If I ever get in trouble, you go down to Virginia and she bales me out.

Keninger: But you've knitted for a long time?

P. Hamling: Un-huh.

Keninger: You just do it by touch?

P. Hamling: Yes.

Keninger: How do you get your patterns?

P. Hamling: Oh, usually I get them through a friend. I write them in Braille.

Keninger: So, you've knitted a lot of baby afghans along with the grandkids?

P. Hamling: Yeah, right. Well, it's not so much for them. I didn't get into it too much then, but it's just lately that I've been knitting; in the last, maybe, five years.

Keninger: You just started learning it?

P. Hamling: No, I always knew how to knit, but I didn't have enough time then. Now, I have more time.

Keninger: Sure. Do you do caps and booties and sweaters?

P. Hamling: No, I don't do that; just straight knitting.

Keninger: Any other hobbies?

P. Hamling: No, I love to read. I get the books from the library and read on tape.

Keninger: Do you usually do something else while you're reading?

P. Hamling: No, that's my time to relax.

Keninger: Ah, good for you. Well, thank you Pat. This has been very interesting. I think people will find it interesting the ways you have dealt with the kids growing up; which I assume has just been pretty much just standard everyday work for you. People are kind of curious.

P. Hamling: Right.

Keninger: John…?

J. Hamling: Karen…?

Keninger: John…?

J. Hamling: Marcia…? (Laughter)

Keninger: John, you worked at the Braille School for a very long time. You probably saw some interesting things there; some kids that were being pretty normal kids playing pranks, that sort of thing.

J. Hamling: Very normal. The same as…The only problems, visual problems; other than that they're just normal kids.

Keninger: What kinds of stuff did you have to deal with as these normal kids were living in dormitories?

J. Hamling: All kinds of stuff. They did the same thing I did when I was a kid.

Keninger: What did you do when you were a kid?

J. Hamling: Oh, just mischievous stuff; stuff you can't put on a recorder. (Laughter) We did stuff like that. I don't think we had any runaways, which I did. Overall, kids just did things that other kids--that normal kids do. They sneak around; do nasty little bad things once in a while. That's all I said. They, basically, are normal kids with a visual impairment. I enjoyed my thirty years.

Keninger: You worked there for thirty years?

J. Hamling: Yeah. My last…It was kind of stressful my last…when we started to deal with the more multi-handicapped kids. It was a whole new challenge, 'cause I had been spoiled working with "normal" kids. And so, when these multi-handicapped kids came along, with physical and mental disabilities, behavioral stuff; it was a lot more stressful to deal with because you had to deal with outbursts and things like that.

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J. Hamling: I enjoyed my job, really. Basically, I think everybody's cut out for certain areas of working with, whether it's adults or students; it's suited for them. And

there are some parts of that…For my part, there are things that I did that a lot of people would feel, "Oh they just couldn't do that." It would be something that they just couldn't handle. And yet, I've seen people working with other kids that are real bad that I don't think that I could do that. So, I think everybody that works with kids finds their niche as far as what they can deal with. That's true, I think, for even adult people that have problems. People can work with them. I probably couldn't work with them at all. So, I think we're all cut out to work with particular students at certain levels, and what that is for you, and what the severity of their disability is. I found at the end, I'd almost come to the point were I was at a point to where I wasn't suited for that type of student. Yet, there were other staff that found no problem with them. So, you know, I left off and they took over.

Keninger: John, for the benefit for somebody listening to this interview sometime down the road, could you explain the transition and change from the time when you started as a house parent at the braille school in what would have been 1960-something 'til…and over the years, the changes that happened in terms of the population?

J. Hamling: Well, you know, starting out I had like twenty-four kids in the dorm; twenty four to twenty eight kids in the dorm. As the years went on, they, oh, what I should say, they started to decrease in numbers. The dorm population decreased, decreased. I think, for the most part, that's when coming in to play was the, keeping kids in their most natural environment, and parents that didn't want their child to come to the school. A lot of that I felt, I always felt that

some of these parents felt guilty, because first of all, they had a child. They birthed a child that ended up being handicapped, and they felt guilty. They just didn't want that guilt to send them away to school. When I always felt, in fact, it was probably giving the student the best. It was best that this student did go away and learn some of the stuff that they weren't able to teach that kid the residential stuff after school hours, like they…with all the help and the things to take care of themselves; personal needs and stuff like that. I realize that with the way it's come down, that's why its all kind of gone down to nothing, because now with the outreach programs and stuff.

I just hope it was the right thing, overall. But I don't feel it is, because there are certain people that are special people that are right on top of things. They're a good student, they're bright, and I think they'll do fine out there in the real world of education in a public school. But, there are that faction that I don't think will do all that well, that I think were served, and I think they should be here. So, I wish that parent still had the choice to do what they want with their kids. But, right now it's getting to the point that they don't have a choice.

There are kids that I think would benefit from a residential program. I'm saying that, you know, there are kids that won't do that well out in public school. First of all, they're not that academically smart and they're from families that won't take the time to work with them socially and with their living skills. I think they're going to suffer for it. I don't think we're going to see the kids going to school that we had at one time. Back then, when I was in school, we had a lot of kids going to college. There's a list of kids that's gone through here that's been lawyers, hospital

administrators, they teach and all that. And, grant you, there are still some today. But, I just don't think that they aren't going to get it. I feel that there's teachers that pass a student on just because they've had them for that time, so let somebody else take over. I'm not sure that the judgment is there in the best interest of the student.

That's my feelings, I realize. And I, probably a lot of us people that's worked with the kids here, feel that way. But I'm sure that the new train of thought is that they're better off out in public. But I'm not convinced of that. I'd like to think that the parents should still have a choice, based on the needs of the kids, whether they should be in a residential school or not. I know I would not be where I am now or done as well if I'd have stayed in Sioux City in a public school. I'd probably be looking out behind bars because I was an active child, and I'm sure I would have been back home. So, there is kids that I just feel this was the best place for them, because of the home environment; things have come around.

So, with that new thinking in the education, and the budgets, kids are going to be outreached into the area schools and hopefully they have enough Itinerant Teachers. I don't think there are enough out there, yet, to give that child enough; one or two times a week isn't enough to visit with your Itinerant Teacher in your mobility. I think they need more concentration on that area, which they're not going to get; which they had here.

So, there's pros and cons; I realize that. But, I would like to see parents have the choice that the school would still be here for those if they want, but as I understand it the doors closed for that. They don't have that option. That's

too bad, because there is the need for this school. But, it isn't going to happen.

Keninger: The kids…When I was in school in the '60s, the school had what we would have called "vanilla" blind or "normal" blind kids. That, basically, means that meaning that most of the kids didn't have additional disabilities at that particular time. Kids that had severe additional disabilities would have been in other institutions. You saw that change over in the '70s, '80s and '90s didn't you; in terms of who came here? The kids, how would you describe that change?

J. Hamling: Um-hum. Well, I think it, well, I don't know. As I think back to, some of these kids did remain in public school or they were late coming here. Some of them stayed, like, some of them stayed in public school and ended up coming here in their later years or vice-versa, too. But I think then change come..; that's why the population dwindled.

As a result, to keep their population at the braille school up, and we started to look at students that had more needs and brought them in that had multi-handicap. Part of that happened because, at one time, we were just a regular straight, normal blind kids. There were no facilities to handle wheelchairs and things like that. But, then came in new elevators. Rice got an elevator and the Cottage got an elevator. So, that enabled us to bring wheelchair students into our school. I'm sure that had something to do with it. We did have our fair share of the population of kids that were confined to a wheelchair. So, that helped them keep the enrollment up here for a while. That's only for so long; temporary. But outreach has come along so far that, now

they feel that they can have these kids out there and deal with them. I'm not so sure that there's still enough staff out there to cover that AEA, Area Education Agencies. Maybe it will get there, but I don't think it's there yet.

Keninger: John, you mentioned the family situations you saw kids come out of. How much impact do you think a family situation has on the way that a child, a blind kid, has success?

J. Hamling: Well, I don't know. I wonder if a lot of that has to do with the education of the family. How educated is the family that child's coming from? A lot of these are from poor people. Families have...I don't know why. I'm not saying that poor people are the only ones that have kids that have needs, but it seems like there's a majority of them out there that, the families themselves, aren't educated enough to deal with their handicapped child. And they probably ended up sending them here because they couldn't deal with it. I don't know. Like I say, there are families that do know what's available, and do care, and, maybe, works with their kids. The thing that bothered me the most is that the social end of the whole matter; because a lot of these kids, I don't care how bright they are, a lot of them go home and after school they don't do anything. You know what I mean.

When they started this whole thing, they used to have the integration, or whatever, inclusion or whatever, in the public schools. And it's fine when they have the kids come out and meet the bus, and bring these handicapped kids into the schoolhouse and that. But, you know, after school hours they went back home and did nothing. There's no social life for them. I'm concerned about their social-being, too.

Some of these kids…I hope those needs are being served out there now. Maybe they have people working in their homes after hours with the parents; hopefully, because that's so important, too. Very important, in fact; probably most important in the education is their social development. They need to have that interaction after school hours; not just during school, but after. A lot of those kids, they don't want to deal with some of these blind kids after school. I know they don't. They just sit there at home. I don't know, hopefully, their parents are trying to do something with them so it's no all dead time after school. Who knows? I've been out of the system over ten, let's see, thirteen years. I'm talkin' thirteen. What I knew when I left here, and that's what I'm basing my thinkin' on. Now, what's going on out there now, it may be all well taken care of. I'm not up on it like I used to be.

Keninger: Sure. John, tell me about your background. Did you grow up in Sioux City?

J. Hamling: Un-huh. Sioux City and what they call the east side of the track, which was a lesser people than the west. No, I, we weren't a close family. It was a perfect thing for me to have the school. As I say, I know there's others that would probably say the same thing, that the school was a great thing to have.

Keninger: It's a long way.

J. Hamling: I was sent away to school when I was seven years old. I imagine when I see a kid six and seven now, I think, "My gosh, my parents sent me away to school when I

was seven years old, and put me on a train. And they wouldn't see me until the next summer." Nine months, well, Christmas; I got home Christmas. And, then summer I was home. I'm sure it was hard on my mother; maybe it wasn't. Maybe she was glad to shove me up on the train. For all I know, she jumped in the boat and headed home. But, it was a good thing for me. My home environment wasn't the best. It was a blessing for me to go away to school. I soon adapted to being away. Kids have a way of adapting to situations, good or bad. Unfortunately, they just make up their mind that's the way life is for them, and they have to deal with it. I can remember my first day at the Cottage when I first got off the train and…

[Interview is interrupted by a phone call, and resumes.]

J. Hamling: Sorry about that. Where were we?

Keninger: Coming on the train, and then going home on the train.

J. Hamling: Yeah, I admit it it's kind of a cold thing; kids leaving their home and coming here to the braille school. I overcame it. I remember Tom, that's one of my good friends. Tom Sheibert and I met, and I think, if I remember right, we were on the merry-go-round and he gave me a Heath Bar candy bar to eat, and we kind of made friends. We went through the twelve years of school together. It was kind of…it's different. I can remember the cottage life in the dorm. Being in a room with six or seven other kids and, oh my, even back then sittin' on the tub because I couldn't stop talking at night. The housemother would put me in the

bathroom because I talked after the lights went out. I sat in there a few nights. (Laughter) I can remember standing in line; back then you had to stand in line. And if you were fortunate to have a box sent to you with cookies and that, you could only have them after school. You'd stand in line and get one thing out of your box that was sent to you. There were times when I didn't have a box to pick out of so, of course, I wasn't in line.

45:00

J. Hamling: Yeah, it was a lot of things. Dorm life was kind of tough. You were away from home. For some of us, it was a good thing. It ended up a good thing for me. As I look back at my brothers and sisters, and how their life went, they didn't even finish high school. At least I got high school and a couple years of college. So, I wouldn't have amounted to nothin' if I'd had stayed in Sioux City. I'm sure that would have been the case with a lot of kids back then. But now, one of the things I'm sure are different now…if for homes. I can't imagine there are still bad homes for people who unfortunately have kids with visual impairments or multi-handicap.

Anyway, I made my way up through that system. I saw a lot of changes. Our kids were pretty normal. Back then, we used sighted guides. There were no canes or dogs, it was all sighted; you used a sighted guide. They were friends, anyhow, going to the same places. In fact, actually, as I think back a lot of those kids that were blind still don't carry a cane for some reason. They just grew up not using one. I even had one kid who even rode a bike. He was with somebody though. He could follow along side of the person

next to him on the bike. There were a few instances happening, but other than that, basically, once you were away from home you get used to it. It's a home here, so life wasn't all that bad coming to the braille school.

The education was the same. There was kind of dumb…this Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School. They thought, back then, that educators…no wonder things were ever done. They had this idea that sight could be saved. I had to get it into the, what, it was in the '80s before they decided…"You can't save sight." Duh! Good Lord, you wonder who in the world the educators were back then. Even…you got that idea.

So, they come up with these green chalkboards with yellow chalk. I thought that was kind of dumb. Have you ever tried to look at yellow chalk on a green background? Of course, there was large print. Some of this stuff they needed to get educated, which they did later on. We had these large print books, huge print on them, and they were saving our sight. That was very interesting. And, to this day, we hold on to the name Iowa Braille and Sight Saving School. It's kind of a joke. I certainly hope our educators are smarter now than they were back then about blindness and helping people. I'm sure even your own department has come so far in helping people now with the latest technology. It is just all at their fingertips now.

Even college is easier now. Back in college…I didn't particularly do it. I had a friend who went to college and had to carry this huge reel-to-reel tape player to college at Coe. He'd have to ask the professor and then he'd set it up in the back of the room. He felt he stuck out like a sore thumb. Of course that bothered him. Now, you, gee, you've got a little thing you can slip in your pocket. You can record your

presentation from your professors. You've got your computers. The technology to go to college is so great now. It's just really something.

The hardest thing I thought about college for me, and back then, when I went to college I had 20/200. That was before contact lenses came along. The hardest thing for me was the reading. I had so much reading to do, and I'd get behind. I did have a reading service. It still meant that I still had to do a lot of eye work for somebody with 20/200 vision. But, the Department did supply me with the service, and that was good. That was a good thing that they did. That took a lot of time. It was a little stressful trying to get through it, I think. I kind of got discouraged. That's why I didn't finish. Nowadays, if I had the technology now, I probably would have stuck with it.

Keninger: Do you use any technology now yourself?

J. Hamling: I don't, you know, with age I'm dealing with just near sightedness. I found that reading glasses don't help. Whatever they do reversing your distance, and whatever they do with their lenses and that. So, I use magnified glasses, because as natural aging of the eyes…And, I was surprised to find out that I'm not the only one that uses magnifying glasses. I always thought that older people used just prescription reading glasses. That's not true. I've talked to several people, "Well, I use magnifying glasses at my age." So that's, I would say that's the only aid right now I use.

For the computer…see, distance, I'm fine to an extent. You know, I get along fine and drive, and that. I'm finding the problem with the reading. And my son got me a larger

computer screen. It's 27" and it has all the Windows7, which I can expand the print. I can change the background, and have gold with a black background. So, I've found ways that I can improvise for the...'cause it was too hard to read the screen just with the regular print now. So, I've moved up to something that's more adaptive to my problem in nearsightedness. That's the only problem I have right now.

I do use...the Department has pocket magnifiers, which are just wonderful. I use that rather than have magnifying glasses; if I misplace them, or lose them, or just...where this pocket magnifier stays in my pocket until I need it, and then it goes back in my pocket so I don't loose them. It's a 3x, and I've gotten how many from the Department? I still misplace them once in a while, but I order more from the Department; sometimes two or three at a time. They're the handiest thing. I have a neighbor that saw me using one day and he said, "Man, gosh I wish I had one of those. I don't have my glasses with me, and I see a price tag or something in the store, or small print on the back of a shirt, and I can't read it." He said, "I'd sure like to have one of them." And I happened to have one that I hadn't opened up, so I gave it to him. It's just really a handy thing for me. With the magnifier and the new program with my computer, I'm able to deal with the inability to have close vision.

Keninger: So, John, you got correction contacts and were able then to drive after you got them?

J. Hamling: Yeah, way back when; when I went to school here I had 20/200, and then years ago there was a doctor in Omaha. I went to see...a very good doctor. And, I was flown over there and he said, "John..." That was back in '65 let's

say. And he said, "John they're coming out with a soft contact lenses. The FDA who controls that are going to release that and its been in research. I'll call you when there available and you come over. I won't promise you anything, but we'll see what it could do for you." So here, about a year and a half later, he called and I went over. So, he fitted me with those contacts and it improved my eyesight right up over; I think I had 20/70, and I'm sitting at 20/50.

Keninger: Wow! Do you have an unrestricted license then?

P. Hamling: To daytime.

Keninger: Oh, to daytime?

J. Hamling: No, I'm restricted to daytime. Anybody 20/40 or less is restricted to daytime.

Keninger: Oh really? Okay.

J. Hamling: I've done well with that. I've gotten by professionally. I've been doing, you know, of course, I don't go traveling to Kansas City, or Chicago, or Minneapolis. You've got to use your brain, too! So, I know my comfort zone and that's what I stay in. I've done well. Actually, I've done real well. No problem.

Keninger: Being able to drive solves an awful lot of problems.

J. Hamling: Yeah. Now Cedar Rapids, Waterloo, not a problem. But, no, I stay out of big cities because I have no business in there. You're traveling at a higher rate of speed, and you need to see better than what I have. So, I'm thankful; I'm thankful for what I've got. We've been able to stay independent. That's all that matters.

And that's another plus I have, which I know goes against some philosophy; is that I believe, and always have believed, that you use the vision you have to the best of your ability. Now, some people are able to do that real well, and some not. But I think if you have any vision, that you should be made to use the vision that you have and not be trained as a blind person just because you can't read print or have to wear glasses. It used to be that if you wore glasses, or that then you were blind, or then you were considered to be visually impaired, which isn't true. I'm a firm believer in using every ounce of vision you've got. I don't care if that means you use the large print or a large magnifier or…That's always been my philosophy. I know the past philosophy in the '70s and probably the '80s was that if you had to use some visual aid to see, you were blind. I don't believe that. If you can go down the street and safely see the light, or people, or half a block, or that away, then I think that's the vision you should use. That's my personal opinion.

Keninger: Sure.

J. Hamling: I know that I'm in the minority, I'm sure.

Keninger: Oh there's a lot of controversy on that; a lot of different opinions on that. Did you have any contact or joining of the organizations for the blind?

J. Hamling: You know, at one time I did belong to…I don't think so. I didn't belong, but I did go to a couple of conventions in the Jernigan's era. But I hadn't been involved with any since. I don't belong to either one of the Iowa Council or the NFB, but I'm interested. You know, I always say that if I was blind and didn't have any sight, and I was totally blind, there's no better organization than the National Federation for the Blind. I just think they do a great job with the people, and they're professional; and I do believe. But, I guess, the Iowa Council does, too. I just simply know more people that's been with the National Federation for the Blind, and they've done well. We did go to a couple of conventions a long time ago. I think they're good organizations. They just have different philosophies.

Keninger: Do you remember much about the issue between the school and the Commission back in the '60s?

J. Hamling: Yeah, I was in that. Yeah, that was unfortunate that they couldn't work together. Maybe the school in one…I don't know. You know, the problem was that they felt that the blind wasn't getting enough areas needed to go on to college here; the Department didn't think so. I don't know, it's so long ago. I remember the problems between the Department and school. That's all resolved, and things are much better now. It doesn't matter. It's history.

Keninger: Sure, it is history. It is certainly a dramatic part of the history.

J. Hamling: Maybe that's what brought change around. I don't know. And things like that do bring change, so maybe it was just as well.

Keninger: Well, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about?

J. Hamling: No, I don't…

Keninger: You don't have anything to say? (Laughter)

J. Hamling: Can't imagine that!

P. Hamling: No.

Keninger: You've worked…besides working here at the school for the blind, which is where we are today, as a house parent you did a lot of work. Other kinds of work, did you not throughout the years; roofing? I remember something about roofing.

J. Hamling: Back when I started here. It's hard to believe that when Pat and I was married, I mean, I made $199.00 a month.

Keninger: Wow!

J. Hamling: We didn't make much. I had to have three jobs. I was carpenter, and eventually in '65 I got work on a moving van, and then I worked here. So, it took three jobs to keep going, because it didn't pay much to be here. Then you had to work nights and you weren't paid. Then you had to stay

up here on duty at night, and we weren't paid for that time. So, that also got better as time went on.

Keninger: You were just paid for eight hours instead of the sixteen, or?

P. Hamling: Un-huh.

J. Hamling: Yeah, you just got eight hours, but you put in all night long. And you still had to get up with the kids when they were sick. You were on duty, but the State would only pay you for eight hours and the rest free. So, it wasn't a good…I think it ended up…I was happy because I enjoyed the work. At first, it was tough financially to make it. Iverson called me. I had just finished going to tech school, and at that time I had a lazy eye. I went to Des Moines Tech and learned Machine Shop Training.

1:00:00

J. Hamling: But, because of the lazy eye, every company I went in to apply for saw that my eye was…I had a lazy eye, which one eye isn't as good as the other. So, I wasn't employed. They said their insurance; they had an excuse for it, that the insurance wouldn't cover it. Then if they were to hire me…and so there was training all for nothing.

Lee Iverson, at the time, was Superintendent and he called me up and he said, "John, we got an opening here for a house parent. If you want to come interview, we'll consider you for the position." So, I came up and interviewed and got the job. I was here thirty years.

Keninger: Wow!

J. Hamling: They didn't care if my eye was lazy. It was real weird they thought, "Who would mess with that lazy eye? You'll loose the other one." Well, here again, not at the Braille and Sight Saving School. Later, they learned that that was false. They could correct…pull that muscle. My gosh, how old was I when I finally got that done; in my early 40's, Pat?

P. Hamling: Un-huh.

J. Hamling: I went to Marshalltown. They just clipped muscles and tightened muscles. Drawn it together and straightened the eye up, and I've been fine. And see, all that time I wouldn't have had to scare all those little children because I had one eye going off to the right. (Laughter) I ended up having a straight eye. I'd look in the mirror, "Wow! That's great." When you're that way, the good eye sees that bad eye looking like it's white on one side, and it's shooting off to the right. So, that was a great thing at Wolfe clinic. They straightened that eye out and I look actually fairly normal; both eyes.

Keninger: Back in the '60s, they were willing to say to you, "We don't hire you because our insurance won't cover you, because you have this lazy eye."

J. Hamling: Yeah, I had a visual problem and they weren't going to; their insurance wouldn't let them. That was their excuse. So, I had to live with that. Unfortunately, we didn't live with that when I did the training. I made everything. I

did everything I was supposed to. I went around. They tried to…the Department had seen me. I went to that…I went on my own. I went with a counselor they had, and I still got the same story. I think we applied at Lennox. Who was the guy back then? I can't remember. It wasn't Roker, he wasn't around then. Olsten? I don't know. But anyway, he got the same story. But not…I was bound and determined I was going to use the vision I had. I wasn't going to switch over and wear blinders, and become blind just to get a job.

So, it was a blessing that Iverson called me. I came up and it was a tough year because the kids, the house parent before was…had no discipline. They were drinking. Oh, it was awful. So, when I came aboard there was only like three or four years difference between me, and say, the juniors and seniors. It was a tough job; very tough. My first year, or year and a half, was very, very rough. Then I got some backing from the administration on discipline, and they finally leveled off and they did fine. It was tough to start with.

Keninger: This is all very interesting. You have added some dimensions to the history that we haven't picked up yet, so I really appreciate both of you being willing to talk with us.

J. Hamling: All right. We could probably dig up more stuff if we had time, but when it's instantaneous like this or spontaneous, whatever, it's hard to bring yourself forward; especially at our senior age. (Laughter)

Keninger: I should have asked you how old you are.

J. Hamling: We're old people.

Keninger: How old are you?

J. Hamling: Oh my gosh! You young people aren't supposed to ask us old people. We hate that!

P. Hamling: We're the same age.

J. Hamling: I'm proud to be in this good of shape at 74.

Keninger: Wow!

J. Hamling: So, we're…

P. Hamling: We're your seniors.

Keninger: Yes, you are.

J. Hamling: We feel fortunate and still kickin'!

Keninger: Well, I think that this has been a very interesting interview. If you think of other things you'd like to add, I'm going to be back. I might just come knocking on your door.

J. Hamling: Oh, you do that Karen. You do that.

1:05:03
(End of Interview)

Deb Brix
July 26, 2011